



AYON CD-2 TUBE CD PLAYER

Price: \$5,499

Review by
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We walked into the huge Ayon demo room at an audio show some time ago and were visually blown away by the stunning tube audio gear carefully placed on several large equipment racks. Black, chrome and glittering glass glowed and sparkled in the less than ideal fluorescent lighting of the hotel conference room. Even without looking at the prices, the impression was, "These have to be Chinese goods". Close enough to spy the less than expected prices on the small cards and even more exquisite detail of the products, there was no doubt they must be made in the PRC. The second thought that arose was "My, my....the Chinese have really surpassed themselves with this Ayon line...".

I spied the always affable and knowledgeable Charlie Harrison and told him how impressive the line looked. He launched into his product showcase rap where at some point I mentioned that these were impressive even for Chinese made goods. Charlie looked at me as if I had just molested his daughter; "These are all designed and made in AUSTRIA, James - not China." I don't know if we were more surprised or embarrassed, but either way we were certainly impressed. He guided us through various integrated amps, stereo and mono power amps, pre amps and even CD players - well over a dozen models and all featuring beautiful tubes and flawless, luxury-level designs and construction. After seeing countless competing products at that show and many others, the prices of the Ayon gear did not fit their apparent quality, specs and ultra high parts quality. The prices were too low.

We've said over and over again that listening to audio gear at an audio show is an adventure is frustration. One really can't do any serious evaluation

in unfamiliar rooms with crowd noise and competing music from other rooms, unknown sources, cables and so on. Still, we could tell the sound produced by the Ayon stuff was at the very least pretty good. Further investigation was a must.

Reviews were arranged and the first arrival was this massive, nearly 30 pound CD player that is 19" wide, 13" deep and almost 5" tall. The case is deep black with finely tooled brushed metal trim, but the corners are rounded giving the player a sculpted, expensive look. The display on the front uses red characters in the readout which should have told me that this was not a Chinese player - they often use a too bright, piercing blue lights. Red is much better. Very visible in the dark yet does not illuminate a whole room when all other lights are turned off. With the CD-2, they can be turned off altogether by remote. I wish everyone used readouts like Ayon.



The CD drawer on the CD-2 is not the plastic kind that makes you wonder how it could be part of a \$5,000 component; in fact, there is no drawer at all. It's a top mount. On top of the player is an acrylic lid that looks like the dark orange Pyrex cookware that mom used to use in the oven to bake meatloaf. Or, since this is from Austria, it also resembles the color of some amber beer bottles. You remove the lid, which stops the CD from spinning if it was so engaged, take out the disk from the well without having to touch the surface of course, simply lay the next disk in, making sure it's flat on the spindle and simply put the heavy but not unwieldy lid back on. The lid/clamp with its integral magnetic mat serves as a stabilizer, weight and laser-beam reflection controller. I tried a couple of \$100+ disk mats that worked very well in drawer-type players, but they had no significant effect here. It seems there is some real audio advantage to the top mount design...

When you initially turn on the player, the front readout notifies you of "Warm up" for just a few seconds as the Ayon logo also illuminates - dimly, thank you. Total track and playback time will come up quickly and you're ready to roll.

The 5 function buttons are also on the top towards the front, each backlit with a red halo. The two silver grills towards the back are vents for the four 6H30 EH tubes and the vents are definitely needed. I was a little surprised at how warm the player got after a few minutes. Your kids aren't going to burn their pinkies and you won't fry the cat if it ventures on there, but puss probably won't want to stay too long, either. That brings up one disadvantage of top loaders - you can't stack anything on top of them. Just something to keep in mind since shelf space and wife factors are things to consider.

Another issue with top loaders is that they can sometimes be rather fussy with user misloaded (carelessness) or extremely bad quality CD stock - unbalanced or warped. I exchanged maybe close to a hundred CD's with the CD-2 and never had one mistrack or exhibit any recalcitrance at all, and that includes my own burned CD-R's and CD-RW's. For me, the loading experienced was better than using a drawer-type player. Note that the CD-2 does not play MP3's or any other type of audio files. Blanks must be burned as an audio CD to be read. It also, a little disappointingly for me, does not decode HDCD. I wish it did.

The player is extremely quiet in operation. There were no extraneous noises at any time from the player or through the speakers - the player performed flawlessly.

While it will not play hi-resolution files like the PS Audio Perfect Wave system we reviewed recently (the world's first we might add), it does permit upsampling CD audio's 16/44.1 to 24/192. That is the only upsample option. Many if not most DAC's which upsample (say the Benchmark models), do not give you the choice of playing back at the native 16/44.1, but the Ayon does, thankfully. Upsampling toggled in real time via the remote with only about a 1 sec mute as the player switches modes, so you can easily hear the differences from your listening chair. A red indicator on the front panel lights up to let you know 24/96 is engaged, again easy visible across the room.

Upsampling is controversial in that some swear by it and others swear *at* it. We've talked about it before, particularly in the Perfect Wave review since it had many upsampling options and various filters for playback. I can say that I have had more than one digital designer tell me that they prefer high quality native playback over upsampling in their own products and when asked why they bother to include it they reply, "because customers expect it". Kind of like vinyl tops on 1970's cars. Others will argue with that and that's fine. I will tell you honestly that after experimenting with several DAC's and players, hoping to find one that sounds better upsampled (including this player), I always end up back at the unaltered native Redbook. I conducted a blind experiment with Linda switching between the two modes during playback of very familiar material. She did not even know I was switching modes of the player - just that I was switching "something". It could have been amplifiers for all she knew at the time. It did not take her long to determine that she preferred the normal native mode over the upsampled. I can say that the Ayon CD-2 does one of the best jobs of upsampling I have heard, but the 24/192 (a very big ratio jump) just sounds too digital while the CD-2 in normal mode is one of the most *undigital* sounding silver disk players I have ever heard.



Around back of the machine hides analog outs with either RCA or fully balanced XLR's with a toggle to choose which is active. Digital out is via either coax or AES/EBU. If you want to run another component's digital out into the CD-2's DAC section, there is a coax digital in as well. That input is also selectable via the remote, which is a very substantial full metal jacket piece that feels as high quality as the player. It has every function you can imagine, including a volume control that lets you use the CD-2 without a preamp. If your music collection is strictly a CD diet, you will most likely want to go direct unless you have a truly upper high-end preamp or linestage. I ran the direct out into several different power amps (or bypassed the preamp in a couple of very high-end integrations) and found the CD-2 output to be outstanding. The only exception was the incredible new Coincident Statement dual-chassis tube linestage that sounds like \$50,000 but sells for \$5,000. Otherwise, I could go preampless with the CD-2 if I needed to and save a bunch of money on electronics and cables.

WHY TUBES?

Unlike a lot of other reviewers (so I'm told) I always read the owner's manuals. The Ayon's is excellent. Succinct and informative with pictures and understandable English and also German. On page 2 there is a half page under the heading "Why Vacuum Tubes". It states that tubes are better because every musical signal at some point is overloaded whether in the original recording session or your listening room. Since we are going to get some distortion, because tubes handle distortion in the *third harmonic* which sounds an octave higher than the fundamental pitch and solid state distorts in the *second harmonic* which makes the tone thin and hard sounding, "tubes sound better because their distortion products are more musical" and "provide a more appropriate load to transducers". Well! That certainly puts an end to the age-old tubes vs. solid state debate, doesn't it! No...of course not, but an interesting tidbit for an owner's manual.

And then there's this, too. Ayon states that the CD-2 needs about 50 hours of break in to reach optimal performance. Break in is not new, even though some people still claim it's nonsense. Ayon goes a step further and explains, "This is partially due to a residual polarization of the dielectric materials in the PCB like resistors, capacitors, chokes, transformers and internal wiring. As music is played through the unit, the electrical signal will anneal these materials". So there you have it. Break in is real. Case closed. See how much you learn reading Stereomojo?



AYON SOUNDS

One of the jobs I worked to earn some money in college was teaching piano and organ in a music store 70 miles each direction from campus. It was around 11 PM when I was returning, driving through the mountains on a cloudless night with the stars so big and close that it seemed like I could reach up and grab a handful. I tuned into a college FM station just in time to hear the first cut of an amazing album. The station played the whole thing through with just a break to flip sides. Maybe it was just that clear, cool night, but the music was gorgeous, full of passion with drippy male harmonies and lots of orchestra in fascinating arrangements. It sounded like a new Moody Blues LP but better somehow. Turns out I was technically correct since the Blue Jays were actually the Moody's two lead singers Justin Hayward & John Lodge venturing out on their own. Of course I bought the LP the next day and picked up the CD when it



came out years later. It's been a guilty pleasure ever since, ripe with nostalgia if nothing else. It is not a particularly well recorded sonic powerhouse, but I know every little note and nuance of every song.

After listening to the Stereomojo Ultimate Evaluation disk and a few other frequent listens it was very apparent that the CD-2 was something special. This was the first CD player, or digital player of any sort that did not sound like the digital I was used to. There was an organic wholeness to the sound that only very fine analog had produced in my system. I rooted out the 'ole Blue Jays, turned down the lights and pressed "play" on the remote. In the darkness of the listening room, Linda and I sat transfixed as cut after cut with no spaces in between flowed from one to the next. As the last notes faded away and the lights came up, we both had "That was incredible" smiles. The big Ayon had woven a little magic as it had with the Mojo disk and as it has ever since with every disk it has absorbed. Yep. The Ayon CD-2 CD player is one of those rare components that compels you to pull out every disk you have ever loved and play it again for the first time.

I know. Sounds like this is getting a little too emotional and melodramatic, but music is filled with emotions from get-down-and boogie to melt your soul, and the beauty of the Ayon is that it allows the music to speak whatever message it holds, unrestrained and clear beyond the boundaries of zeros and ones and the audiophile jargon we associate with listening to our stereos. You don't find yourself saying to yourself, "Wow...listen to those highs..that solid bass and the details in the bowed strings", at least not after a few minutes. It does not seduce or beguile or impose any particular personality on the music, it simply lets the music, for better or worse, speak for itself in a way digital never has, at least for me.

YOGA ANYONE?

Winston Ma of FIM records sent a CD in his DXD series entitled "8-String Religion" by David Darling that is mastered at 24 bit/352.8 KHz and transferred to blank media that uses 99.999% pure silver for the reflective layer. The "8 strings" to which the title refers is a custom made cello with eight strings instead of the usual 4, accompanied by some other acoustic instruments and a vocal or two drenched in reverb. The music is best described as mellow New Age; something that would be right at home in a yoga class. And something that you would never find in a CD player at my house. But since it was from Winston I popped it on - his recordings have surprised me before. You're expecting me to say the lofty music played through the CD-2 was divine and changed my life forever. Uh...no. It was still too lethargic and sappy, but the Ayon did convey the message in the music even if it was one I did not relish.



So the Ayon is not a miracle worker that magically transforms badly recorded or played music into *Kind of Blue* or *Beethoven's Fifth*, but it will let Miles, Ludwig or Clampton let you hear, feel and experience what they were trying to say to you and evoke a response which is why music was given to us in the first place, right? Nothing sizzles or booms. The CD-2 just compels you to sit there and let the music happen. It never forces you to lean forward and squint your eyes in an effort to hear something and the digital sound is not the least bit

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fatiguing, it is a joy to listen for hours.

I have recently auditioned four other players that are in the same price ballpark or much, much more. One is the \$6,000 Perfect Wave DAC/transport combo which is outstanding and a Grant tube CD player that was also wonderful. The other two I cannot mention yet. I have also heard and reviewed some very good separate DAC's. None of the above moved me the way the Ayon has. Call it Mojo. Call it soul. Call it magic if you want. Whatever it is, the Ayon has it for me.

TO CD OR NOT CD

You might be thinking "Over five grand for a machine that doesn't play SACD's or DVD's, MP3's, high resolution WAV's or anything but CD's in this day in age? CD's are becoming obsolete if they aren't already!" I was thinking the same thing. Most stores have cut down floorspace for CD's in favor of movie DVD's. CD sales are plummeting. But then there are a lot more CD's out there than SACD's or DVD-A's and even LP's at this point. 24-bit downloads are few and far between and the best source of them recently went belly up. Reference Recording's DVD based HRX format is wonderful and Linn has some good selections at 24/96 and above for download on their site - read our music reviews. But RR only does RR titles and Linn only does Linn and a couple other obscure labels and Chesky does pretty much Chesky. It will be a long time folks before we see mainstream artists in all genre's in anything better than 16/44.1 at Walmart and Best Buy. Or iTunes for that matter. When the record labels demand \$50,000 just to license one album for downloads in lossless files, plus a cut of the purchase price of each track, think; how many downloads would it take at well over a buck each just to break even? HD Giants bet more than \$40,000,000 that it would work. It didn't. And Apple has sold billions of songs in lossy mp3's. Music in resolutions greater than CD has clearly not appealed to the masses yet and what *is* selling the most is *less* than CD quality.

DOES CD STILL SUCK?

It has taken over two decades, but CD audio has come a long, long way. Faster processors and the development of better filters and knowledge of how to eliminate jitter and other digital artifacts has exploded.

Read the following carefully so it's not misinterpreted: I think the Ayon CD-2 can be as musically satisfying and rewarding as an equivalently priced analog front end. Shocking? Well, consider that one would have to buy a turntable, arm, cartridge and a good phono preamp - four pieces - for that amount. We're not talking about used stuff here since we are not talking about a used CD player. I hear you thinking out there. My analog front end would cost over \$12,000 to replace - not including all the requisite accessories like alignment tools, brushes, scales, demagnetizers and a record cleaning machine. And I enjoy the CD-2 as much as listening to my analog. I have never been one that is in love with the ritual ceremony of playing an LP (many admit that they are) or one that easily ignores pops, skips and surface noise. I don't own any scratched or excessively noisy records in my 3,000 plus collection. I am not in love with LP's. But I am in love with music - I have been since I started playing piano at age 2. I have always preferred how music sounds when played on a good analog system, so I do not make these kinds of statements lightly.

STEREOMOJO SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATION

Is it smart to invest \$5,500 in a straight CD player? The right answer of is; it depends. If you own only a handful of CD's and don't plan on buying many more, probably not. If your system costs less than the price of this player, probably not, too.

BUT - if you...

- Have a large collection of CD's that you love and cherish and are still buying them regularly
 - Have a system that is capable of a high level of performance
- Have a great love of music that supercedes your love of all things "audiophile"
 - Your finances do not put the price completely out of reach

...the Ayon CD-2 is an absolute must audition.

Bear in mind that the player does have digital in's and digital outs so you can hook it up to your computer to play ripped CD files at CD quality. Also, the CD-2 sounds magnificent when run directly in most amplifiers. I say *most* because amps can be difficult with which to match impedances, so be aware of that. But you just might be able to get away with no preamp at all depending on how often you listen to just CD's. Good money saver and easier to justify a substantial investment. It does have the option to upsample to 24/192 which may improve the sound of CD's even more to your ears.

However, being a top loader, you cannot stack anything on top of it nor stick it in a thin or narrow shelf. You need room to remove the top and load the disk. And it does produce moderate heat. It needs space around it to breathe.

When we say "Specific Recommendation", it doesn't get more specific than this.

You don't hear me say this often, but when it was time to send the CD-2 back, I told them I wanted to buy it. As I write this, I am in that process. I should tell you that they said, "Wait! You need to hear our new CD-5 model! It's even better than the CD-2! So, apparently CD can sound even better than the CD-2. But the CD-5 is about twice the price of the 2. I'd bet it does not sound twice as good. I am very happy with the 2 and I can't see paying the price of the CD-5. But like I said above...it all depends.

The Ayon CD-2 has such a high level of performance, top quality construction and at least a fair if not good value price, we have awarded it out
MAXIMUM MOJO AWARD.

We have also chosen the Ayon CD-2 as our 2009 CD PLAYER OF THE YEAR. Congratulations to the folks at Ayon and US distributor Charlie Harrison for this distinction.





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